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Developing a Program for Spanish Heritage Learners in a Small College Setting

Anne Fountain

A SMALL private woman's college in Raleigh with a traditional student base from the eastern part of North Carolina seems, at first glance, an unlikely locale for a program designed for Spanish heritage learners.¹ Yet, in recent years, the United States Hispanic population has grown significantly even in areas not traditionally Hispanic, such as North Carolina.² With a now burgeoning Spanish-language heritage population, North Carolina's educational institutions are being challenged at all levels to provide both a hospitable setting and appropriate curricular adaptations to serve the needs of this group, and small private colleges are no exception. The experience of Peace College provides an example of how a school that has not traditionally served Hispanic students can build programs for such heritage learners and how institutions with a relatively small Hispanic population can provide appropriate curriculum and resources for such learners.

Peace College, because of its size and constituency, has used its defining characteristics and its special interests to build a small but viable program for its students of Hispanic background—combining curriculum initiatives with travel opportunities, cultural events, and links to the community. Key components of this process and how they were developed are the focus of this article.

At Peace College, outreach to Spanish heritage learners has been targeted in five major ways: (1) through curricular additions and adaptations; (2) through the development and promotion of specialized library resources; (3) through travel in the United States and abroad; (4) through connections to the Hispanic community and to agencies and businesses with links to Hispanics; and (5) through campus activities and services. In addition, a conscious effort has been made to sensitize the campus to the cultural- and language-specific interests of young women from a Hispanic background.

Curricular components have been foremost in the planning to engage Hispanic students. New courses such as Hispanic Communities in the United States, Hispanic Practicum, Cross-Cultural Seminar in Mexico, Hispanic Literature in the United States, and Problems in Spanish

Translation and seminars such as one on Cuban literature in the United States are all part of an expanded program in Spanish and Latin American studies. As on most campuses, enrollments in courses, whether new or continuing, are subject to scrutiny. Thus a conscious part of the design of the new courses was that they were to be both accessible and attractive to students and not limited solely to Hispanic students. Another consideration was that the courses be available to students besides those majoring in Spanish who have sophisticated reading skills. While the professors in our Spanish program believe strongly in the intrinsic value of foreign language literature and fully recognize its importance for reading advancement, vocabulary acquisition, conceptual mastery, and cultural awareness, the creation of the new courses reflected two realities on our campus: first, that some students of Hispanic background were not, in fact, Spanish speakers and, second, that a number of students who were minoring rather than majoring in Spanish might enroll in the new course offerings, making them numerically viable.

One of the first courses to be offered was Hispanic Communities in the United States, a three-hour course that got off to a strong start thanks to the support of the faculty members and interest from the students. This course, taught in English and open essentially to all students, featured a strong historical component and had a two-course sequential history prerequisite, a requirement appreciated by the history faculty and many of those in humanities. Additionally, the class included a travel unit that proved to be a major attraction for students. By

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maximizing the advantages of flexibility available on a small campus, by relying on strong alumnae loyalty and contacts, and by securing institutional travel funding for students, the Hispanic Communities course was able to take students for three to five days to New York, Miami, and Washington, DC, at very reasonable cost (typically between \$150 and \$250 per student for each trip, which included travel, lodging, and some meals), and to engender considerable enthusiasm for the class.³ In many instances, but especially in the travel components, Hispanic students in the class were able to draw on their experience—and sometimes their language skills—to help others in the class comprehend cultural differences. As a short-term adjunct to the Hispanic Communities course, a one-credit Hispanic practicum, offering a weekend focus on Hispanic contributions in Washington along with reading and discussion sessions, was initiated.

Because Peace College has an endowed foreign-study program in Mexico and many cultural contacts in place in Yucatan, another program component designed both for Hispanic students and for those needing a better understanding of Mexico was a two-credit cross-cultural seminar in Mexico, a ten-day living experience in Mérida, Yucatan, with preliminary sessions and follow-up classes on the Peace campus. Because of the foreign-study endowment, the seminar in Mexico is very economical for students (\$550 plus airfare for travel, meals, lodging, and course credit). The course has also provided a way in which the college can highlight the importance of cultural understanding in a Latin American context, but with relevance to the demographic dynamics of the college's local setting—a county with a rapidly expanding Hispanic population.

North Carolina faces an influx of emigrants from Mexico and Central America to its workplaces, and as consequence many issues of language and culture have arisen.⁴ An increasingly popular approach taken by state government and business to meet these challenges has been to arrange for travel to Mexico as a way to expand the cultural horizons of those who deal with Hispanics.⁵ The cross-cultural seminar that Peace offers in Mexico has aims similar to those projected by business and government and is part of an overall campus goal to increase diversity and opportunities for understanding diversity. By providing a highly positive—though brief—experience in Mexico, the cross-cultural course has the potential of making non-Hispanic students more sensitive to the Hispanic students as well as allowing heritage learners—particularly those of Mexican background—to reclaim and validate their traditions.⁶

Hispanic Literature in the United States is a new class offered for the first time in fall 2000. The course is designed to present works by Hispanic writers in the United States, with an emphasis on contemporary authors, especially women. In addition to anthologized works, students will read a novel by Cristina García and a

work by Julia Alvarez. Because some of the reading for this course will be in English, the course will be an option for most of the students who have successfully completed intermediate Spanish. This course, like the Hispanic communities course, brings a dimension of Hispanic presence to the curriculum and in a very real sense confirms the contributions of Hispanics in the United States for heritage learners as well as for non-Hispanics. It will also fulfill a literature requirement and is designated as a writing-intensive course.

As schools, businesses, government agencies, and organizations in North Carolina all confront translation needs relating to the growing Hispanic population, individuals and institutions are faced with dilemmas posed by the translating and interpreting pressures. Unfortunately, a fairly general assumption among many in the public has been that just a little bit of training and some language knowledge qualify one as a translator. Although many efforts are under way to responsibly address the translating and interpreting needs, problems have been created by a misunderstanding of what professional translating and interpreting entail and what providing such professional services will cost. In such an environment, some employers and service providers have looked automatically to heritage speakers of Spanish (and indeed to students of Spanish) as an inexpensive source of assistance. Thus one of the new courses, *Problems in Spanish Translation*, will highlight both the parameters of the field and the problems and pitfalls that translation issues can bring. The aim of the course is to present an overview of translation and interpreting, to include a focus on literature through a look at examples of literary translations, to give students some preliminary practice, to show bilingual students where they can go for professional preparation, and to let students who may be advanced—but not fully proficient—realize their limitations. As part of the instruction, students will hear from professional translators and will learn how these issues affect both non-Hispanics and the Hispanic community in North Carolina.

A further curricular option for students of Hispanic heritage and students of Spanish is the opportunity provided by special seminars and independent study. One such course was a seminar on Cuban literature in the United States. Others currently in the planning stage include a three-hour course on Latin American film and a one-hour course on Hispanic storytelling. Additional courses will be created and offered as time and resources permit.

As a second way to enhance the campus ambience for heritage learners of Spanish, Peace College has sought to highlight two special collections in the library: a set of personally inscribed books given by Clemente Soto Vélaz, a Puerto Rican poet whose granddaughter attended Peace, and a collection of books and realia that includes some unusual and hard-to-find items dealing with the Cuban patriot and writer José Martí. By giving a distinctive library focus to Cuban and Puerto Rican literature

and by organizing occasional events in connection with the collections, attention has been drawn to Hispanic contributions that are of special value to the college.⁷ In addition, having popular magazines for Latinas available and placing Spanish-language newspapers in a prominent place have helped to establish a Hispanic presence in print. These may seem like minor components of a strategy to create a comfortable climate for heritage learners, but an accumulation of details such as the displays—especially on a very small campus—can make a statement.

The domestic and foreign travel dimensions of the new courses described earlier have proved important in addressing the needs of heritage learners. These trips have signaled the college's involvement and investment in the heritage and homelands of Hispanic students and have generated enormous good will on the part of non-Hispanic students as well. Travels to New York City, Washington, DC, and Miami have demonstrated the importance as well as the impact of Hispanic communities in the United States. Visits to early Spanish settlements in Georgia and South Carolina have shown the Hispanic foundations of the nation's eastern seaboard, and travel to Mexico (on an annual basis) and to Cuba (in spring 1999) have strengthened ties with family members of heritage learners and have also helped non-Hispanic students to appreciate the complex connections among communities of Cubans and Mexicans in the United States and those in the countries themselves.

Because Peace is located in the heart of Raleigh and close to much of state government and downtown offices, the college has been able to create a number of internship opportunities—many of which have special appeal for a heritage learner. Examples of these internships include working to produce a brochure in Spanish about services to battered women, serving as an aide in a magnet school with a bilingual program, assisting with business interests at the North Carolina Global Center, and helping to assess the impact of Hispanics in North Carolina at the North Carolina Center for International Understanding. In addition, many students have volunteered for service projects dealing with Hispanics and have attended Hispanic community events such as the Latino Diamante Awards, Fiesta del Pueblo weekends, and activities of the Latin American Association of North Carolina.⁸ Campus contacts with North Carolina's ombudsman for Hispanics in the Office of Citizen Affairs and the governor's top adviser on Latino affairs have proved beneficial.

The college's initiative to be more inclusive and inviting to young women of Hispanic background includes a conscious connection with student activities coordinators. Faculty members in Spanish and Latin American studies have worked with the student activities director and the head of the college's Arts and Lectures series to promote events that would be of special interest to heritage learners and students of Spanish. Each year for the

past three years the college has sponsored a Latin dance night for students with instruction provided for salsa, merengue, and cumbia. Professors and members of the community participate and students are introduced in a social setting to one of the fundamental components of Hispanic and Latin American culture. For spring 2001, a noted Cuban American, Eduardo Zayas-Bazán, is scheduled to be one of the campus Arts and Lectures speakers.

Last but not least, the importance of including other areas of the curriculum and various aspects of the campus in a process of awareness and sensitization is recognized as crucial to the college's design for providing a welcoming environment for young women of Hispanic heritage. Inviting students and colleagues to attend guest lectures given in English by prominent women authors from the Spanish-speaking world has established connections with English and women's studies and has given viability and visibility to the Hispanic emphasis. In spring 2000, for example, Peace students had opportunities to meet Cristina García, Luisa Valenzuela, Elena Poniatowska, Alejandra Basualto, and Lourdes Arencibia.⁹ Highlighting Hispanic student success through the department newsletter, *Las Noticias*, and through guest editorials to other campus publications has also been well received.

The example of Peace College shows how a very small college and one without a tradition of Spanish heritage learners can create both curricular and noncurricular program aspects of benefit to these learners and can rise to the challenge presented by changing demographics. It also illustrates how strategy combined with substance can produce results and how perceived drawbacks such as small size can be used to advantage. In this article I have emphasized elements of format to suggest an overall framework. Nonetheless, the most essential element in the design is providing an experience that is both culturally sustaining and academically stimulating for heritage learners. This is the real challenge for all campuses—large or small. Peace College is committed to seeking ways to enhance and expand what it offers to Spanish heritage learners—who will be an increasingly important part of its student population in the twenty-first century.¹⁰

Notes

¹Peace College is a private liberal arts college for women with an enrollment of under six hundred students. It was founded in 1857 and is named for a Presbyterian elder. Its main building served as a Confederate hospital during the Civil War and the campus was home to a freedman's bureau after the war.

²North Carolina is currently undergoing great demographic change. Recent figures show that Wake County, the county where Peace is located, has the second highest growth rate of Hispanics in the United States (133.7% from 1990 to 1997) among counties with Hispanic populations of 6,695 or more (Rosen).

³The travel components exposed students to a wide variety of places and people. In these trips, for example, students visited

museums, churches, neighborhoods, festivals, and special exhibitions. In Miami, they were invited to the home of a prominent Cuban American family and toured a large translating and interpreting business.

⁴In some areas of the state a backlash against Latinos is taking place. For example, an anti-immigration rally in Siler City, North Carolina, attracted four hundred participants and featured the former Klansman leader David Duke. Siler City Elementary School is now forty-one percent Hispanic, mainly because there has been an influx of Hispanic workers to work in the poultry industry (Glascok, "Rally").

⁵The success of the travel experience in changing people's perspectives about Hispanics was made evident in the article "Mexico Trip 'Humbling' for Official" (Glascok).

⁶The cross-cultural program in Mexico houses students in a beautiful and spacious home that once served as the residence for a governor of Yucatan. Art works by Gabriel Ramírez, one of Yucatan's most noted artists, adorn the walls of the house and the home is located in a residential neighborhood in the northern part of Mérida. The entire staff in the house is Mexican and participants experience both an authentic and an aesthetically pleasing cultural immersion. Such a dimension is important for the purposes of this program, especially because of the negative views that some communities in North Carolina have of Mexico and Mexicans.

⁷See Doggett for a description of the ceremony to inaugurate the Soto Vélez collection.

⁸The Latino Diamante Awards dinner recognizes contributions to the Hispanic community in North Carolina in a number of fields. The annual Fiesta del Pueblo celebration is a weekend of exhibi-

tions, cultural events, and activities held in the Research Triangle area of North Carolina. The Latin American Association of North Carolina sponsors social events, festivals, and cultural programs.

⁹In 2000, Cristina García gave a public reading at North Carolina State University on 23 March, and Luisa Valenzuela spoke in Chapel Hill on 24 March. In addition, honors students and students of Hispanic background were given the opportunity to hear Elena Poniatowska on 10 March at a conference in South Carolina. Chilean author Alejandra Basualto came as a visiting scholar to the Peace campus, 4–9 April. Cuban author and translator Lourdes Arencibia was also a visiting scholar in April.

¹⁰For fall 2000, the Spanish and Latin American studies program is requesting multiple copies of *Spanish for Native Speakers*, a volume in the AATSP Professional Development Handbook Series for teachers K–16. We will use this book, which is available for order online at <www.harcourt.com>, not only as a resource for Spanish teachers but also as a source of information for colleagues in other disciplines.

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